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## Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China.

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***Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China.***

**By Evan Osnos. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. ISBN: 9780-374-535278**

The Red Dragon that is China has experienced such rapid growth and development that it now circles around the world majestically with plumes of industrious smoke flaring from its nostrils. In this sense, China is an elegant, yet dangerous beast. Like the mighty dragons of the eras before, it is both beautiful and scary. The long slender body of the Chinese dragon twists hither and thither. This flexibility is symbolic of the numerous changes that China has undergone and the ones that it will undergo in the future to ensure its success. These changes are beautifully shown in Evan Osnos's novel, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. Prefaced by an enlightening prologue and concluded with a thought provoking epilogue, the book spans 24 chapters. Osnos aims to identify China as clearly as possible across its 403 pages. He achieves this task to an extent, but truly defining China is about as easy as holding onto a slippery eel; when you think you have it, it wriggles easily out of your grasp. Despite this challenge, the author manages to identify a lot of the major changes that occur in China. Put simply, this book is the story of a nation told in the only way possible; through the eyes of its people.

The author, Osnos, should be praised for his ability to seamlessly weave together historical occurrences and personal stories. For almost every event and every change China experiences, the reader gets a unique account of the event through the eyes of someone who lived through the event or was personally affected by it. This choice is key in creating such a

successful and personal picture of China. Too often authors will describe historical events in a way that conveys their beliefs. Conversely, Osnos offers the audience the stories of China's citizens and lets the reader decide why they are important. Hearing personal accounts of real people helps the audience grasp the ambition that, as Osnos describes it, hit China like a "fever" (3). The idea of ambition, much like the title suggests, permeates the whole of the book. It is this ambition that drives the Chinese people to change, adapt, and overcome in order to become the best.

One of the themes that bleeds through almost every story in the novel is change. Osnos portrays change in this novel in a unique way. When he describes a shift in China's history, he supplements the info with a real story from someone who was affected by the shift. For example, Osnos describes the strained relations between China and Taiwan in the first chapter of the novel. He could have easily recounted this tumultuous time with bland, boring statistics. Instead, he colorfully illustrates the story of Captain Lin Zhengyi, a Taiwanese military man turned communist defector. Lin, a faithful father, husband, and patriot of Taiwan succumbs to the propaganda that mainland China constantly directed towards Taiwan. Lin left everything he loved behind because he truly believed that "China would prosper again...and he would prosper with it" (12). Hearing of the successful treason pulled off by Captain Lin Zhengyi, the audience is able to more easily understand the lengths that some Chinese people would go to in order to obtain what they believed in. Osnos provides the audience with ample examples of this concoction of historical events and personal stories.

The most enjoyable part of this novel is the range of entertaining stories it tells. Spanning from country treason to internet privacy, Chinese economics and the widening wage gap, there is a tale for almost every major change in China. Change is to be expected anywhere there is

growth. China is no exception to this rule, and the author captures these swathes of innovation by correlating the public with the private. For example, when Deng Xiaoping declared that it was time to “let some people get rich first,” Osnos gave the reader a prime example of one of the lucky few who actually managed to attain the wealth (60). Osnos tells the story of a Chinese woman named Gong Haiyan who rises to the heights of economic and professional success because of Deng’s new policy. Her story is important because it adds a personal element to the idea of wealth in China, but also for other reasons. Gong Haiyan did not get rich because of her birthname, relatives, or gender. Rather, she built a dating website from the ground up that found massive success all across China. The reason the dating website grew in popularity was because of the change in gender prevalence. China suffered from a massive imbalance of males to females. This translated to a lot of single males having to vie for a limited number of single females. Chinese adults were no longer yielding to the advice of their elders by accepting arranged marriages. This dynamic change is a great example of how Osnos addresses change in *Age of Ambition*.

In conclusion, the book is a great read for several reasons. For starters, the book has an easy-to-read, almost conversational dialogue to it. This choice by the author allows audiences of various reading skills to navigate the numerous ideas presented in the text. Furthermore, Osnos writes in equal parts historical fact and personal anecdotes. The writing style is what truly sets this book apart from ordinary historical books. Osnos paints China in a beautiful way, and reading this novel is a solid substitute for those readers who may not be able to make it to China themselves. All in all, the book should be appreciated for its comprehensive look at China and the changes it has undergone. There is something for everybody here. The novel is replete with dates and specific events that cater to the history buff’s desire for facts. The writing is smooth

and easy to follow. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the author is cautious about keeping his American biases from seeping into the book which creates an authentic, refreshing take on modern China.

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#### About the author

Payton Jay Dison hails from Henry County, Georgia and is currently pursuing a B.A. in English with a focus on professional communication. He is a member of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity and interested in video games, soccer, and studying other languages.

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